

Story #21 Part A USS Viburnum AN-57-Net Laying Casualty

Because of it's length this story will be sent in 2 parts.

On September 23, 1944 Ulithi Atoll, in the Caroline Islands of the Pacific, was taken from the Japanese with no opposition. It was wanted for it's deep lagoon. This was indeed a prize. It would become the US Navies largest anchorage in the world and one of the navies best kept secrets during World War II.

Net Laying commenced on October 11th. 3 Net Cargo ships and 4 Net Tenders were involved in this operation. They were Net Tenders Cornel AN-45, Mastic AN-46, Winterberry AN-56 and Viburnum AN-57. Net Laying material was taken from 3 Net Cargo ships. They were Sagittarius AKN-2, Tuscana AKN-3 and Zebra AKN-5.

On October 28th Viburnum AN-57 had picked up a double section of net from Tuscana AKN-3. Viburnum was working with Cornel AN-45 when she hit a submarine mine laid by the Japanese. 3 crewmen working in the Carpenter Shop of the forward hold lost their lives. 12 men were thrown over the side and rescued, including Ernie Langbein and Richard Smith. They both attended our Providence reunion.

Here is an account of this incident taken from Richard Smith's unpublished manuscript.

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I was sitting on the deck with four other men when all of a sudden there was a terrific explosion. I thought someone had hit me on the back of the head with a baseball bat and I could feel myself being lifted in the air. That was the last thing I remembered until I came to and someone was slapping my face and telling me not to fight. It was my friend Ernie Langbein. I didn't know what had happened, but I didn't fight. The water was sucking everything down underneath into the hole at the bottom of the ship. Ernie had a big timber and he got a smaller one and gave it to me and hung onto me. All of my clothes had been popped off. The buttons had come off of my shirt. My pants were down around my ankles so I couldn't tread water very well. As I looked up I saw that the bow of the ship was level with the water and the propeller was sticking out. I thought the ship was sinking.

There was a high wind blowing and the crew was throwing kapok life jackets to us and the wind was throwing them back over the ship. I looked around to see where everyone else was. All of us who were on the rolling chock were present except Johnny Little. We finally found him way out, probably 200 feet from the ship. His face was all bloody and all we could see were his white teeth. He was smiling and waving at us. Our motor launch has been tied up on the other side of the ship just above where the mine hit us. It was blown out of the water along with all the men who were in it. It did a flip and landed right side up and they were able to climb in it, get it started and come looking for us. They didn't pick any of us up. They had cartons of cigarets and they were throwing them to us. I never did know why we were all quite mixed up.

All of a sudden another motor launch came from a nearby ship. It was USS Volans AKS-9, a General Store Issue Ship. They picked us up. I remember Ernie Langbein telling us to keep calm and not look scared. They took us over to their ship and first took the ones who were hurt the worst. I didn't have any injuries. I swallowed a lot of water and was under a lot of shock. They gave us a lot of brandy and gave us a physical. We stayed aboard her overnight.

It was apparent that Viburnum might sink, so we went back the next morning. A ship had come alongside and tied on to us. They had divers going down to see how bad it was and if the bulkheads were holding. They decided she wasn't going to sink so they towed us over to a naval floating repair kship called the Dixie. They made further inspection and then towed us to a floating dry dock. The floating dry dock was actually anchored and they pumped water into it and it sank down to almost sea level. It had a hatch that opened in the front and they towed the ship inside and braced it from the sides with big 12X12 planks. Once they had it secured they pumped the water out of the floating dry dock and it rose up and lifted us out of the water. They then begin their repair work.

The repair work took about three weeks. The hole was about 30X35, so they had to cut off all of the wooden beams and box the ends of them in with steel plating. The keel was broken in four places and they had to box that in with steel. They made ribs out of steel to replace the wooden ones and welded them in and then put a steel patch over the side of the ship covering the hole. They turned us loose and we were able to scrape the bottom of the bay and pull up some motor launches and other items.

I was assigned a crew of three men as I had been made a boatswains mate by that time. We were to go around the islands and look for sections of net that had broken loose, buoys and other items. We towed them back to the mother ship. That was an enjoyable assignment. On many of these islands we had to hold off sometimes as far

as a hundred yards to two hundred yards. We then waded in waist deep water through the coral. It was very interesting, as an example, to come up upon a shark sunning itself or to observe anything else of interest.

All of the natives there were assigned to live on one island and it was the Viburnum's job to supply them with food, blankets and clothing. Every day we would take a load of things over to them, so we got to know them fairly well. They would also come out and visit the ship. That assignment lasted quite awhile, but we finally got orders to be decommissioned which meant that we were no longer an official naval vessel. We were protected by the Navy, but they wanted to send us home. So with the steel patch on our wooden ship and hardly any ammunition we were ready to leave. We had one drum of 20 millimeter shells for the three 20 millimeter guns and one ready box of 3 inch ammunition. We had no radar and no underwater sound gear.

About the second night out of Ulithi somebody reported a ship on the horizon, so we went to general quarters and stayed at general quarters all that night and all the next day. Every once in awhile we could see part of the superstructure come over the horizon. We were told that the ship was sending us a signal wanting to know what the code of the day was - they used to change the code every day - and we didn't know because we were decommissioned. We would answer back and tell them that we were the USS Viburnum and that we were decommissioned and on our way back to San Francisco. They didn't believe that so we spent three days and four nights on general quarters eating apples and sandwiches until the last early morning we could see this ship coming at us with the turret guns aiming right at us. It was pretty scary. They stayed in that position until it got light and looked us over and then came right up along side and said that they had been following us more to protect us than anything else, but they had to leave us to go in another direction. We were only doing two knots, so this ship would leave and then come back and see what was going on with us. So at that slow speed we made it to Fiji and then from Fiji we made it to Honolulu.

At Fiji we joined four wooden mine sweepers that had worms in their hulls. We had to refuel them halfway between Fiji and Honolulu. We did sideswipe one during a storm when they brushed up against us and we damaged their bridge wing, but we were all right. They didn't like our slow speed at 2 and a half knots of top speed. We had to run the bilge pumps constantly, but we finally made it to Hawaii where we took on fuel and food and headed for San Francisco. At our top speed of 2 and a half knots we made San Francisco in 18 days

I will never forget sailing into San Francisco Bay. A band was on a barge. They saluted us and played "San Francisco Here I Come!"

This was the end of my overseas duty. From that point on we were sent over to the Oakland Naval Supply Depot. I was transferred off Viburnum to a YTL (Yard Tug Little) and given the duty of moving barges and hauling them to Stockton up the San Joaquin River.

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